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ABSTRACT

The implications of a developing theory about human posibilities for the conduct of individual life and the future of society rest on the basic fact that, because only a fraction of the possibilities the future holds can be actualized by an individual or by society, choice is a universal imperative. One important reason that better choices are not made is that many of the alternatives are not perceived. Some suggestions about widening the range of perceived possibilities are identifiable from research on creativity, especially the study of divergent thinking. Counselors endeavoring to help clients and individuals seeking to improve their self-management skills can use a delaying strategy to allow more alternatives to become visible. Especially with regard to moral choices, current times call for the recognition of multiple action possibilities rather than simple right versus wrong decisions. The flourishing new field of futuristics is generating new techniques for the generation of multiple alternative plans. (Author)

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IMPLICATIONS OF MULTIPLICITY

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IMPLICATIONS OF MULTIPLICITY

Leona E. Tyler

Now and then during the course of a long life as a psychologist and as a human being, one is struck with an idea that ties together a great many loose ends. For me that central insight was the realization of life's multiplicity. Any one life holds infinitely more possibilities than can ever be actualized. In different species and different individuals, life takes on an infinite variety of forms. Living as I do at the seashore, I never cease to marvel at this fantastic diversity. There are the jellyfish, floating on the surface, automatically shooting out thousands of stinging cells when prey approaches, paralyzing the victims so that they can be drawn into the central four-lobed mouth and the gut waiting to digest them. There are the hermit crabs whose external skeletons are so tender and vulnerable that they have to move into shells other animals have discarded or even into old pieces of glass or plastic they find lying around on the beach. There are the starfish who attach their suction-equipped tube feet to the shell of an unlucky scallpp or mussel, force the shell open, and then extrude the whole stomach through the central mouth to digest the prey before swallowing it. There are the flounders who prowl around on the sea bottom, born like other fish with eyes on both sides, but experiencing, just before maturity the migration of one eye to the same side as the other, so that the fish can see normally while lying on its side. I could continue indefinitely with such examples. There are millions of species, and each individual member is unique. Life is inconceivably prodigal of possibilities.

Human life is no exception, The number of possibilities is staggeringly large. A couple conceives two children, but there are billions of possible egg-sperm combinations that could have occurred but were not used. A child learns one language, and sometimes an additional two or three, but there are thousands of languages that might have been learned instead. There are upwards of four billion persons in the world who might have been my friends. I have become acquainted with only a few hundred and have known even a few dozen even moderately well. Out of the thousands of places the world holds I have actually lived for more than a few months in only eleven, and traveled extensively in not more than a hundred. And there are many people whose range is more limited than mine.

Philosophers have not been blind to this plethora of possibilities. Many of you probably remember the famous passage from William James's Principles of Psychology:

> I am often confronted by the necessity of standing by one of my empirical selves and relinquishing the rest. Not that I would not, if I could, be both handsome and fat and welldressed, and a great athlete, and make a million a year, be a wit, a <u>bon-vivant</u>, and a lady-killer, as well as a philosopher; a philanthropist, statesman, warrior, and African explorer, as well as a "tone-poet" and saint. But the thing is simply impossible. The millionaire's work would run counter to the saint's; the <u>bon-vivant</u> and the philanthropist would trip each other up; the philosopher and the lady-killer could not well keep house in the same tenement of clay. Such different characters may conceivably at the outset of life be <u>possible</u> to a man. But to make any one of them actual,

> the rest must more or less be suppressed. So the seeker of his truest, strongest, deepest self must review the list carefully, and pick out the one on which to stake his salvation. All other selves thereupon become unreal, but the fortunes of this self are real. Its failures are real failures, its triumphs real triumphs, carrying shame and gladness with them. This is as strong an example as there is of the selective industry of the mind... Our thought, incessantly deciding, among many things of a kind, which one's for it shall be realities, here chooses one of many possible selves or characters, and forthwith reckons it no shame to fail in any of those not adopted expressly as its own. (Vol.I, pp.309-310)

Using ideas like this and others gleaned from many other writers, most notably Alfred North Whitehead and C. S.Peirce, I have been trying over the last several years to construct a theoretical framework based on some general principles that I believe are almost unarguable:

(1) The future, in contrast with the past, consists not of actualities but of possibilities.

(2) Every individual living creature, the human being like the others, is up against one absolute limitation, namely <u>time</u>. One's possibilities may be infinite, but one's time is finite.

(3) <u>Choice</u>, therefore, with or without awareness, is a necessary and universal aspect of life. One must select some possibilities, reject the others.

I was pleased to encounter this emphasis on the centrality of choice to life in a recent book by the neuroscientist, J.Z.

Young, Programs of the Brain, a book that attempts a synthesis of everything he has thought about during his long and distinguished research career. Again and again in the successive chapters he makes this point. "Life continues because organisms make repeated choices among previously established sets of possible alternative actions." "The very essence of living is the presence of varied possibilities of action, allowing selection or choice of those that ensure that the organism remains alive." "Life depends upon choice among various possibilities. All living things must choose. Human beings have a greater number of possibilities of action than any other creature and therefore the widest burden or privilege of choice." "Learning is by selection from the initial set of many possible actions."

In my recent book, Individuality: Human Possibilities and Personal Choice in the Psychological Development of Men and Women, I made a first attempt to organize psychological , biological, and philosophical ideas into a structure hardly solid enough as yet to be called a theory, but perhaps useful in enabling us to look at some old questions in a new way. I then proceeded to apply this structure in redefining the area about which I know the most, the study of individual differences. Today I should like to employ this structure of ideas in looking at some other areas in which I have more than a little interest.

Strategies for the Conduct of Life

During most of my professional life, I have been concerned with counseling, both the practice of the art and the training of other practitioners. In recent years I have been pleased to see an offshoot of counseling practice, self-management, grow and flourish, and what we have learned from counseling other people

can now be used in people's management of their own lives. When I entered the counseling profession in the 1930s, counseling was thought of mainly as vocational guidance, although some attention was directed to personality problems if they seemed to be standing in a client's way. During and after World War II, this focus shifted to psychotherapy, and occupational choice was deemphasized. Theorists talked about change rather than choice as the purpose of counseling. As I thought more and more about multiple possibilities, I found myself returning to my original assumption that choice is the fundamental process, but I attempted to broaden the concept to include much of what the psychotherapists as well as the career counselors were attempting. Suppose we start with the assumption that in any circumstances or any state of mind there are several directions in which an individual might move forward, whether or not we can see them. The problem is that there are insuperable obstacles in the direction the person has been moving. What psychotherapists try to do is to remove or at least decrease the force of these obstacles. What possibility theory suggests is that we seek an open path in another direction, bypassing rather than attacking the obstacles. By obstacles I mean things like inferiority feelings, examination anxiety, outbursts of anger, perhaps even alcoholism and drug dependence. They may be unfortunate situations or unfortunate personality traits. We view them differently if we remember that the person might function in any number of other situations, and that a complex personality is made up of a large number of components besides the one's we are looking at.

The first essential in making this strategy for the improvement of life work is to render some presently invisible alternatives visible. It constantly amazes me how many perfectly feasible alternatives for action and development we just do not see at all. It would be an interesting exercise if we had time for it today to hand out sheets of paper and ask each of you to write down all of the things you could think of that you might be doing right now instead of sitting here listening to a lecture. I'll mention just a few that occur to me. Take a boat ride around Manhattan. Window shop on Fifth Avenue. Go to the New York Public Library and read. Browse in book and record stores. Cross over to Staten Island on the ferry. I could continue but I think this is a long enough list to illustrate my point. These are all things that are free or very inexpensive, and you can do them by yourself whether anyone else is interested or not. Any one of them could open up new vistas, put you in touch with new people, stimulate new ideas.

What is true for this hour-by-hour use of time is even more true for long range possibilities - we just do not see many of the alternatives at all. The psychological research area that seems to have most to say about this blindness and how it might be dealt with is the work on creativity. Early in the game, these researchers, notably Guilford, came up with the concept of <u>divergent thinking</u> as a process different from the one our intelligence tests measure. They asked their subjects to think of different uses for a common object like a tin can, or different captions for a cartoon, and then tried out various ways of coding the responses and analyzing the data they obtained. Even children can do this kind of thinking and

some of them do it very well. Why couldn't we generate lists of possibilities for the short-range or long-range use of time in the same way? For a number of years I have been playing around with research of this sort, using ninth grade boys and girls as subjects. I can't claim that much has come of it so far, but it has at least shown that the technique is workable.

Once you start noticing the remark, it is impressive how often you hear people say "I have no choice", parents punishing their children, filling station operators raising their prices, diplomats threatening war. It usually means that the person has on blinders that keep all but one alternative action invisible. What we are talking about now is removing these blinders.

On the other hand, some people are struggling with the opposite sort of problem, the availability of so many alternatives that the act of choice becomes difficult or impossible. Toffler had a good deal to say about this in his book Future Shock. Modern communication, advertising, and marketing techniques confront us with the constant necessity of making choices about comparatively trivial matters. Which dtergent? Which automobile? Which deodorant? One good self management strategy is to be somewhat arbitrary about most of these things. The main objective is to avoid consuming our most valuable limited resource, time, in the making of unimportant choices. Buy the detergent or deodorant endorsed by your favorite television star, or the cheapest one, or the one you have a coupon for, but don't deliberate about it. It is the important choices, work, spouse, religion, values, causes, and the like that are worth spending time

on.

So far we have been talking mainly about externalities, objects and situations. But one must also choose between one's own perceptions and impulses. To do this competently one must cultivate reflection, delaying response until there has been time for second thoughts - and perhaps third, fourth, and fifth thoughts. Centuries before there was any such thing as a science of psychology, wise men and women were recommending this delay, and some of our proverbs reflect their thoughts. " Count ten before replying", for example. In recent times research on children has demonstrated the advantages of a reflective style over an impulsive style, and it is perhaps in early childhood that the habit of waiting for second thoughts to appear can most readily be acquired. But there seems to be no reason why persons of any age cannot cultivate reflectiveness if they are convinced it is worth cultivating. It is in human interactions that this process of waiting long enough for more than one possible interpretation to come to mind is most valuable. Most if not all remarks can be interpreted and responded to in more than one way. This gives us more control over our interactions with other people than we often realize that we have.

As one monitors one's impulses prior to action, one can often see two main directions such actions can take. One goal is self expression. An angry person feels a strong urge to strike out at an offending object or tell somebody off. The other goal is to accomplish some purpose, to get something done. The first impulse is likely to be of the self-expressive sort; the intention to accomplish something requires a little longer to take shape.

A great many examples could be given. I think of a faculty meeting or a similar occasion in another work setting. A lively discussion of a controversial motion is going on. Dr. X. has strong opinions about the matter that he is eager to express. Apt phrases are on the tip of his tongue, and it would give him real pleasure to use them. But "Wait". Before you rise to your feet, Dr.X., consider the fact that the arguments you wish to state have already been brought into the discussion, so that your contribution will serve mainly to prolong it. Furthermore, some of the clever phrases might be considered insulting to your opponents and thus solidify the support of their friends. If you really want the motion to pass, what you should do is to think of some new arguments. possibilities that no-one has seen before. It is not a natural behavior, this "delay and choose" process, but some articulate professors do manage it.

At this point I was troubled by a feeling that I might have gone too far with this suggested strategy, and ought to make it clear that it is only one among many. Life would be a dull business and we should find it very difficult to understand people with whom we are intimately involved if everybody weighed their words and considered their probable effects all of the time. To be always asking oneself "Just what was Marie trying to accomplish by that remark?" would be just as ridiculous as the question psychologists always used to be accused of asking, "What do you suppose she meant by that?" You remember the jokes that were going around about the time that psychoanalysis became popular. There is certainly a place for self expression, a place for righteous indignation, a place for spontaneity.

Another strategy for the conduct of life suggested by possibility theory is the voluntary deployment of attention in long range as well as short range activities. Many of us have desks piled high with papers, among them the requests for contributions that pour in from day to day. All sorts of human miseries assail our eyes and ears every time we turn on the TV or pick up a newspaper. There is crime and corruption in high places; hundreds of things we eat and breathe cause cancer; terrorists and thugs roam the streets; hundreds of important people are making unsound decisions that may be creating grave hazards for future generations. Even if we want to, we simply cannot pay serious attention to all of these things. Each individual human being can deal with this bombardment of stimulation by consciously choosing which ones of these social concerns to devote attention to, assuming that other individuals will make choices different from ours, so that together we manage to do what needs to be done and carry on the important business of the human race. Having done our chosen share, we can feel free to direct our attention to the beauty of things and persons around us. It is through this voluntary deployment of attention that we develop some of our possible selves and relinquish others. Each of us is in the nature of things incomplete, but we have some control over the shape this incompleteness takes.

The Morals of Multiplicity

Thinking about human choices brings us to an area which has been mainly the province of philosophers and religious leaders, that of ethics and morality. Down through the years psychologists have not felt comfortable there, preferring to take a neutral stance toward

the behavior they studied. But this has been changing of late, with research on moral development, values, prosocial behavior, resistance to temptation, and the like. Circumstances are pushing us in this direction as human society becomes more and more complex, and the Ten Commandments no longer seem to cover all of the contingencies we meet in our practice, our teaching, and our research. Like the other things I have been talking about, moral and ethical behavior involves choices. Does possibility theory have anything useful to say about them?

The codes we live by consist mainly of "Thou shalt nots" and do not give us much guidance about what we should do. To the congressman we say, "Thou shalt not accept gifts from Korean business men", but he still has to decide how to finance a campaign ethically. To the researcher we say, "Thou shalt not use people as subjects without their informed consent", but she still has to decide how to conduct a scientifically sound experiment using only subjects able and willing to give it.

The difficulty seems to me to lie in an assumption we make that wrong and right, good and evil, are polar opposites, so that by shunning evil we can be sure of doing good. Suppose we were to replace this assumption by the general one I have been recommending, that in any situation there are many alternative possibilities for action and that each entails multiple consequences. As in the other areas discussed, many, probably most of these alternatives are not immediately visible. The first essential for ethical action is that we locate and bring to light at least some of these invisible alternatives. This calls for creative thinking about possibilities.

and consequences. Like the ripples that spread out in all directions when a stone hist the water,an action always has multiple consequences, Not all are forseeable, but some are, and it is our responsibility to imagine as many as we can, then compare alternative courses of action , and then make a decision that takes as many as possible of these imagined consequences into consideration. This approach is likely to be unpopular, I am afraid, because it can never provide the security that thinking based on polar opposites does. One can never be sure of having done the <u>right</u> thing. One can only say,"I believe I have done the <u>best</u> thing, all factors considered." I suspect that more unsatisfactory decisions have been made because of lack of imagination about alternatives than because of any preference for wrong over right. While multiple possibility thinking about moral choices has not been very influential as yet, there are enough examples of it around so that we know it can be done. One is the way some idealistic young men dealt with the military draft during the Vietnam War. It was not too difficult to follow personal "Thou shalt not" principles, and they ruled out altogether the alternative of fighting in Vietnam. The difficult decision was between alternatives like declaring themselves conscientious objectors and accepting alternative service, volunteering for noncombatant duty in the Medical Corps, going to prison, or leaving the country. None of these could be considered absolutely right. All have negative as well as positive consequences for the person, his relatives, and his friends. But moral decisions were made in this way, and I think if it were possible to follow

them up now a decade later, it might appear that they had worked out well.

Among simple people and in simpler times, moral thinking in terms of multiple alternatives was probably less necessary, except perhaps for a few privileged individuals. Today there are many more of us privileged in the possession of money, status, or influence, for whom it is essential. A pioneer woman who bore eleven children, fed them, clothed them, and raised them to maturity, meanwhile keeping her house in order and helping her husband with the farm tasks, did not have to expend much time or energy on moral decisions. Most of the time she knew without thinking what was the right thing to do. A woman in our time with so many more options must constantly struggle with such decisions. The manager of a multinational corporation, the diplomat negotiating a treaty in a sensitive area of the world, or a top government official must deal with a staggering array of possible actions. Such a person can never be absolutely sure what has been done is <u>right</u>.

<u>Planning for the Future</u>

I should like to shift our attention now from the implications of multiplicity for the individual to the implications for society. A new discipline has been taking shape in recent years, variously called future studies, futurology, and futuristics. It deals with alternative, possible futures rather than with straight linear predictions. The movement has many roots - literary Utopias, science fiction, military weapons development, and prophecies of imminent doom for the world because of nuclear technology, air and water pollution, and overpopulation. The accelerating pace of technological

and social change increased the urgency of the challenge to mankind to think seriously about its future, and the movement really took off during the 1960s, generating, as such movements always do, its own organizations, special methodologies, and publication channels. Economists, political scientists, biologists, sociologists, philosophers, engineers, writers, and at least a few psychologists rallied to this banner and began coming out with books that caught the public eye.

The area they have staked out for investigation differs in one unique way from the fields the investigators were trained in. Futuristics is the study of what does not exist. Thus it is not at all clear that futuristics is or can be a science. What futurists do is to use facts about the past to develop projections or forecasts. They avoid the use of the word <u>prediction</u>, popular for so long in psychology and the other physical and social sciences. One cannot predict because what is to happen in the future depends on choices and decisions not yet made. Thus futuristics, like the other undertakings I have been talking about is a combination of science and art, and calls for imagination as well as reasoning. This brings it within the scope of my projected theory of human possibilities.

The goal of futurist thinking is to generate <u>alternative</u> pictures of the future; multiplicity is essential. And yet, as I read accounts of what futurists have done and are doing, I am impressed with how difficult and unnatural this consideration of mutiple possibilities seems to be. This had struck me forcibly when I was sifting through research to use in my individuality book. Over and over an approach to the analysis of individual differences that started

out in a pluralistic way became gradually transformed into a single trait or dimension. Binet's creative observations of the differences in how individual children think got lost for a time as we boiled the differences down to a single measurable trait, intelligence. George Kelly's personal construct theory got lost for a while as psychologists concentrated their efforts on the measurement of a single trait, cognitive complexity. Fortunately, in both those areas and in many others, the pendulum is now swinging back, and we are more willing to look at multiple aspects of individuality. In futuristics there is the same tendency to forget that we are delineating multiple possibilities and concentrate attention on producing more and more accurate forecasts of single trends. One quotation from the chapter by Ida R. Hoos in the recent Handbook of Futures Research puts this well:

> Thanks to what might come under T. S. Kuhn's description of our 'dominant paradigm'(Kuhn,1970), we think we can study the future rationally and scientifically.
>
> Even though the magic is gone, the mumbo-jumbo remains, with data the driver, analysis the watchword, quantification the rule, and model-building the prime preoccupation. These are the warp and woof of what would otherwise appear as widely disparate concerns. They are the common procedural elements when, for example, we ponder technological forecasting, technology assessment, environmental impact, social indicators, quality of life calculations, and risk analysis. But to pursue the metaphor this is why the fabric is full of holes.(p.53)

She goes on to show how inadequate are the data on which the forecasts rest, and how disastrous some of the conclusions have been.

But if research designed to produce single, accurate forecasts for problem areas like energy, population, or housing has not been of much value, some of the techniques futurists have invented for bringing invisible possibilities to light are intriguing. One that appeals to me especially that I think has not been used much if at all in psychology is the writing of <u>scenarios</u>, that is, making up stories about events we imagine happening in the fururе. While the scenario writer uses facts about the past, he or she is not bound by them, recognizing that each of these facts can enter into a variety of combinations with other facts, and that human decisions that will be made are crucial for the events that follow them. The author of the chapter on methodology in the book <u>The Study of the Future</u> cautions us to be especially on the lookout for scenarios that bring in 'far-out' possibilities,"because one of the few things we can be sure about is that the future will be filled with them".(p.114)

If we are cultivating rather than ignoring multiple possibilities, it is obviously a good idea to have many individuals producing scenarios and getting together to discuss their relative merits. A term one hears more and more frequently these days is <u>anticipatory democracy</u>. (I think Toffler in 1970 was the first to use it.) One of our principal difficulties in formulating social policies is the lack of consensus. We are beginning to see a faint image of a system that would work quite differently from the adversary system that

now dominates the decision making process. What we do is assume that one is for or against a proposed policy, and that any compromise must be somewhere on the straight line between the pro and the con ends of the argument. Suppose that instead we had a group of concerned people participate in generating, say, twenty alternative policies. It might be that there would be one of them on which everybody or almost everybody would agree. Thus the basic assumption that the future consists of multiple possibilities could have profound effects on our social and political thinking.

Dealing with multiplicity calls for a kind of thinking psychologists do not understand very well, especially the first step, bringing to light the invisible alternatives. In our research we usually provide the alternatives the subject is to consider. The exception is, of course, the research on creativity and divergent thinking, but this has been directed more toward identifying people who are good at it than toward understanding and stimulating the process. I would like to see a concerted effort to find out what we need to know. All of us, in indirect ways if not in direct ways, can participate in this effort. All of us are to some extent our own creations, and the society we live in is our joint creation. This lays on us a burden of responsibility, but it also gives us hope.

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